

Second Chances

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Second Chances

by [StarlessMistake](#)

Summary

Time Travel AU

Fate has never been kind to Aleksander, but for some reason it has chosen to offer him the most precious gift imaginable - a second chance.

When Aleksander finds himself back at Kribirsk, in the moment just before the Sun Summoner's discovery, he is determined that this time around he will get things right.

Notes

Hi my lovelies!

I started writing this story for the darklina discord server's time travel event. I've seen quite a few fics where Alina goes back in time, but I really wanted to explore what would happen if Aleksander went back - hence this fic was born.

A quick note on continuity before we start:

I am following show canon for season 1 and then loosely following books 2 and 3. I won't be touching on much from the books and you do not need to have read them to understand what's going on. However, do be warned that I will be spoiling the ending of Ruin and Rising, so please keep that in mind. Also, for obvious reasons I am ignoring the King of Scars duology in its entirety.

I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I've enjoyed writing it!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

I was just guessing at numbers and figures

The first thing that Aleksander became aware of was the fact that he was lying in a rather undignified manner, sprawled on the floor.

This fact was of course much less important than the second thing he became aware of - which was the fact that he was *not dead*.

He scrambled to his feet with a gasp, his hands automatically flying to his chest where he remembered the feel of cold, Grisha steel as it sapped the life from his body. But to his surprise he felt no blood. No wound. There was not even a hole in his kefta.

But he remembered dying. The image of Alina knelt over him, her blade in his chest as he begged her to say his name one last time was seared into his mind. It had not been a dream. It had been real, he was sure of it.

So why was he not still dead?

He cast his focus to his surroundings, hoping that they would give him some clue to his impossible situation. The sight before him was a tent - a familiar tent. Somehow, he was standing in his old tent from Kribirsk. The one that had belonged to him while he was still general of the Second Army. Before Novokribirsk. Before the stag. Before *her*.

At one end of the tent stood his old desk, its surface strewn with papers and missives. He strode over to it, scanning his eyes over the documents hoping that they would give him some clue as to what the *hell* was going on. However, before he could read more than a few sentences from the first report, he was interrupted by someone barrelling to the tent behind him.

“Moi soverenyi!”

Aleksander’s head snapped round at the sound of the frantic voice, and it was only his centuries of self-control that stopped him gasping at who he saw before him. Fedyor. Alive and breathing. Wearing Corporalki red and looking so *young* as he stared at Aleksander expectantly.

“What?” It was the only question that Aleksander was capable of voicing. A hundred different questions swirled in his mind. *How are you alive? What’s going on? Why is there no hatred in your eyes when you look at me?*

Fedyor heard none of Aleksander’s inner turmoil. “The skiff has returned. It was attacked by volcra not long into its voyage. It suffered heavy casualties,” said Fedyor. When Aleksander made no move to speak, the Heartrender continued hesitantly. “There were also reports of lights in the fold.”

“Lights...” said Aleksander, his voice barely above a whisper. He tried to comprehend what he was hearing. This whole conversation was familiar, but his racing mind could not quite put

all of the pieces together.

“There are conflicting reports. But some of the soldiers are rambling that it might have been a... Sun Summoner,” said Fedyor.

Aleksander struggled to keep his breathing under control when he heard those words. The fragments of the puzzle clattering into place in his mind with stunning clarity. This was the day he met Alina. The day everything had changed, setting him on an unstoppable path to his own destruction.

Was this to be his punishment? Forced to relive through all of his mistakes, all of his failures? To watch as everything he had ever built, ever worked for, came crumbling down around him once more?

Or was this merely the vision of a dying man? A glimpse at all that he could have had if only he hadn't been such a fool?

The sound of a throat being cleared startled him out of his hopeless pondering. He looked up to see Fedyor watching him carefully, clearly waiting for a response.

Aleksander swallowed, wishing to banish the unbearable dryness in his throat. “Bring her to me,” he ordered.

Confusion flitted across Fedyor’s expression, but he did not offer further comment. Instead, he merely bowed and exited the tent, heading back in the direction of the dry docks.

Once more alone, Aleksander fought to calm his racing heart, grateful that without an amplifier Fedyor was not able to detect heartbeats unless he was looking for them. Desperately, he cast his mind back to what he remembered from the first time he had lived this day. The sight of Alina appearing before him for the first time was permanently seared into his brain. As well as the first time that he had seen her light - the moment when he had realised that he was finally, *finally* not alone. However, the rest of the day was a blur, memories slipping through his fingers as he tried to grasp onto them.

He resisted the urge to growl in frustration. It was of no matter. He had made it through this day once before, and he could do so again.

His feet itched to pace across the length of the tent, but that would not fit his image as the stoic General Kirigan, so instead he busied himself by pretending to read one of the reports on the desk. Behind him, he heard the sounds of footsteps and chatter as Grisha began filing into the tent - standard procedure following an incident in the Fold.

A minute passed, and then another. The tension in his body was so tight he thought his spine might snap. But then a hush fell over the room, and he knew.

She was here.

“Bring her closer,” he said, at the very least remembering how their encounter had started. Then he inhaled a shaky breath to steady himself and turned around.

She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

To see her now - standing proudly with her chin tilted upwards, eyes shining with determination despite her obvious fear and confusion - it almost sent him to his knees. It would have done, had his hands not gripped the desk behind him with such force that he could feel the wood begin to crack.

She looked everything and nothing like the woman who had held his hand as he released his final breath. The weight of his betrayals not yet burdening her shoulders. And *oh* what he would give if it would mean she would never have to live with such pain.

Their eyes met from across the room, and he could swear that she was peering directly into his soul. Or perhaps he was only projecting the guilt that consumed him - more painful than any knife. She held his gaze steady, even as the silence stretched between them. Then, ever so slowly, she raised one eyebrow.

Damn, he was gaping, wasn't he? There was a minuscule flickering of amusement in her eyes as he shut his mouth from where it had fallen open.

She was clearly waiting for him to say something, but he found that his mind had completely deserted him, and he could not for the life of him remember what he had once said. He swallowed before he opened his mouth to speak.

"What is your name?" His voice did not quiver, and for that he was glad.

"Alina Starkov. Assistant cartographer. Royal Corps of Surveyors," she said quickly.

The words sounded familiar to his ears. He paused for only a moment to consider his next question.

"Tell me, Alina." Her name sounded so sweet on his tongue. "What do you remember?"

She seemed to consider him for a moment before responding. "I'm not sure, *sir*." The emphasis on his title reminded him that he should not act so familiar with her. They were supposed to be strangers after all. "I remember waking up on the dock. Everything before that is a blur."

Frustration welled once more within him. This was going nowhere. "So, who does remember what happened?"

Nobody spoke up. He racked his brain to try and remember who was also on the skiff, but his mind came up blank. Fortunately, at that moment Alina cast her eyes on the group of Grisha at the side of the tent. Her eyes landed on Zoya. Was she the Squaller assigned to that particular crossing?

"Zoya?" He prayed that his guess was right, but it seemed for once that luck was on his side as she began to speak.

"We were attacked, barely two markers in," said Zoya confidently. "Someone lit a lantern."

“And?”

“The volcra went after the rifleman and our Inferni first. And then there was a searing light.”

“It was her!” shouted one of the other soldiers.

He turned his attention back to Alina. “Is what they say true? Can you summon light?” he asked as if he did not already know the answer.

“Not the last time I checked,” she quipped back. The sound of a collective chuckle drifted his way from the assembled Grisha.

The situation was rapidly spiralling out of his control. He needed to take charge once more, so he abandoned the rest of his questions. They would not gain him any more knowledge after all.

“Well, why don’t we check now?” he said as he called on his shadows to blanket the tent in darkness. They responded to him instantly without even a trace of pain. One more thing he had missed dearly.

He took the first step towards Alina. “Lift up your sleeve.”

She kept her chin raised defiantly as she pushed her sleeve up past her elbow. As the distance disappeared between them, he considered using the wicked-sharp knife that adorned the ring on his thumb, but the idea left a sour taste in his mouth. He did not want her first memory of him to be one of pain.

Praying that it would not be necessary, he left the ring where it was. Her breathing quickened as he approached, until at last, he stood in front of her, only inches of space between them. She did not look away from him as he stared down at her. He was sure he could find the meaning to the world in her eyes.

And then, before he could second-guess himself further, he reached out and took hold of her arm.

As soon as their skin touched, he felt their connection flare to life. Calmness flooded through him, quieting his racing heart as he felt himself sinking into the familiar sensation. He could see that Alina was having a similar reaction, her breathing slowing, her eyes widening.

Touching her felt like coming home. Aching, beautifully familiar.

Tentatively he sent his call running through her, searching for that spark of power that he knew to be inside her. To his surprise, he did not have to search at all, as her light rushed up to meet him.

Her power burst outwards, illuminating her skin in an otherworldly glow as she lit up the tent in a golden light.

Around him he could hear shouts of shock from the assembled Grisha but he paid them no mind. His attention was focused solely on the radiant woman in front of him, as his mind

tried desperately to comprehend why he could feel her so strongly.

Suddenly it came to him - *the tether*. Somehow it had travelled with him, connecting him to this Alina. He grasped at the frayed edges, desperate to feel the connection that somehow still tied their souls together. Alina let out a faint gasp at the pull. He knew she would not understand what the connection meant, but it was clear that she could feel its effects all the same.

They stood locked in that moment for what felt like an eternity, until eventually she wrenched her arm away from him. He released his grip as she stumbled backwards, the light fading from her skin without his call. Her body radiated shock as she stared up at him, her mouth moving silently to voice words that he could not discern.

“Everybody out!” he ordered, his eyes never leaving Alina’s face. The sound of chatter and footsteps picked up before receding. When he sensed that the tent was almost empty, he tore his gaze away from Alina and turned towards Ivan who was lingering by the entrance. “Ivan, prepare the carriage and an armed escort. The Sun Summoner and I leave for Os Alta immediately.”

“Yes, moi soverenyi,” said Ivan, before swiftly exiting to fulfil his orders.

“Wait, you’re coming too?” said Alina, sounding confused.

“Yes.” The image of Alina lying on the forest floor, an axe raised above her ready to strike, still haunted him. He had been seconds from losing her before he had even gotten the chance to know her that first time round. That was not an experience either of them needed repeating. “Our enemies will have seen your demonstration in the Fold and will have already sent assassins to try and find you. You’ll be safer if I travel with you.”

She said nothing in response as she turned away from him, eyes downcast. They stood in an awkward silence, waiting for Ivan to return. Fortunately, their wait was not a long one and it was only a few short minutes before the sound of hoofbeats could be heard from outside as the carriage arrived.

Aleksander ached to offer her his hand, but he resisted. That was a familiarity he had not yet earned. So instead, he merely gestured for her to walk ahead of him as they stepped out of the tent and into the midday sun.

Ivan stood to attention next to the open door of the ornate, black carriage. Alina approached hesitantly, looking for a moment that she might try and bolt away from it all. In the battle of common sense and fear, it seemed that common sense won out, as she did not try and run. Instead, she took another step towards the carriage, glancing at Aleksander as he did so.

“Wait,” said Aleksander, stopping her before she could enter. He turned to his Heartrender. “Ivan, give Miss Starkov your kefta.”

It was difficult to say who looked more unimpressed with his order, identical expressions of disdain crossing both of their faces. But Ivan nonetheless complied, shrugging off his kefta and handing it over to Alina without a word. She reluctantly slipped her arms through the red

sleeves, pulling the coat up over her shoulders jerkily. The kefta was too big for her, the hem of the sleeves dangling well past her wrists, but it would provide adequate protection and that was the most important thing to Aleksander at this moment.

Once the kefta was donned, Alina climbed up into the carriage. With a sigh she slumped onto one of the plush, velvet seats.

Aleksander turned to Ivan before following her inside. “We’ll take the southern trails, it’s less likely we’ll be ambushed. We do not stop until we reach the Little Palace.” Then he climbed inside, shutting the door firmly behind him as he took the seat opposite Alina.

A firm knock to the ceiling and the carriage began to move.

Now that they were finally alone, Aleksander found that his normally silver tongue had turned to lead. The silence was heavy between them as he struggled to find the words to say. That is, until the silence was broken by the sound of shouting from outside the carriage.

“Alina!” came a gratingly familiar voice.

She flinched slightly at the noise, her eyes darting to the window where her annoying tracker could be seen running after the coach. Fortunately, he could not match the speed of the horses, and it was not long before he was left in the dust kicked up by the wheels. Alina said nothing as her friend disappeared from view, her jaw clenched and her shoulders tight with tension. Once the tracker was out of sight, she looked away from the window, staring resolutely at her hands and not at Aleksander.

“Someone you know?” He tried very hard to keep his tone neutral, but he must have failed at hiding his disdain for the boy because there is a sharp edge to her voice as she responds.

“An old friend,” she said, still refusing to meet his gaze.

He sighed, regretting his words. He tried again to speak to her, his tone softer this time.

“You must have questions?” he asked gently.

At that, she finally glanced up from where her hands were twisting in her lap. Their eyes met from across the carriage, igniting the spark of connection from the tether once more. He knew she must feel something from the connection, but her expression gave nothing away.

She considered him for a long moment before she opened her mouth to speak. “What happens next?” she asked carefully.

“First, I get you safely to the Little Palace. Once there you’ll be taught how to control your powers and how to protect yourself,” he said. “I know you’ve had to deal with a lot in the past day, but I promise you that the Little Palace is the best place for you right now.”

“What about the Fold?”

He closed his eyes briefly as he considered his response. “When you’re strong enough. When you’re ready. We’ll enter the Fold together and destroy it.”

His words were truthful, unlike the first time he had made that declaration to her. Before, he had thought he understood the Fold, but in the end it had been his downfall. Now, he knew that destroying the Fold was not a choice, it was his only option if he wished to somehow bridge the gap that stretched between him and Alina.

She turned away from him with a small huff, staring determinedly out of the window.

“I know such a feat may not seem possible at the moment, but I think you’ll find that you’re capable of much more than you might think,” he said earnestly.

“It’s not that,” she mumbled in response, but did not offer further clarification.

He could see that her eyes were beginning to droop from her reflection in the window. It was understandable that she would feel exhausted after everything that she’d been through in the past day.

“It’s alright, you can sleep,” he said. “I’ll get you safely to the Little Palace. I promise.”

She gave no response, as her eyes were already closed.

The journey was long, but fortunately passed without issue, no ambushes waylaying them. Aleksander let out a small sigh of relief as they passed through the gates of the Little Palace. Alina seemed to sense that they had arrived at their destination, as her eyes blearily blinked open as the carriage came to a stop.

The hour was late, the grounds illuminated only by the pale moonlight as he stepped out of the carriage. He was unable to resist the temptation to offer her his hand to help her climb out. Surprisingly, she took it with no complaint. The touch of her hand filled him with that same intoxicating sense of calm. He wanted nothing more than to drown in it.

Reluctantly, he released her hand once her feet were firmly on solid ground, reminding himself once again that they were meant to be strangers, and that she would not think kindly to him clutching at her hand like a lovesick child.

Side-by-side they walked through the corridors of the Little Palace as he guided her to the Vezda suite. Their footsteps echoing off the stone walls was the only sound he could hear. Well, that and the persistent pounding of his heart as it beat against his ribcage.

“If there’s anything you need, anything at all, then you need only ask,” he said. “The purpose of the Little Palace is to be a haven for all Grisha. This is to be your home, and I want you to feel comfortable here.”

She murmured a thanks in his direction, the soft sound like music to his ears. His pace slowed as they approached the double doors that led to her new rooms - he wanted to stretch this moment out longer, to remain in her company for a few more precious moments. But despite his wishes, it was not long before they had arrived at their destination.

“I’ll send someone tomorrow morning to help you get ready,” he said. For a moment he could swear that he saw a smile flicker across her face, but it was gone too quickly to say for sure.

He held the door to the Vezda suite open as she walked inside. The interior was just as lavish as he remembered. Lush furnishings of cream and gold in every corner. Fitting accommodations for the Sun Summoner.

She hesitated once inside, quite possibly overwhelmed with the state of her new accommodations.

Reluctantly, he began to close the door behind her, leaving him alone in the corridor. However, before the door could fully shut, she turned to face him and held a hand out to halt the door from moving further. Quickly, she shrugged off the borrowed kefta and held it out for him to take.

“I think Ivan will want his kefta back,” she said.

He reached out to take the kefta. If their fingers happened to brush as he accepted the coat then it was surely a coincidence, and not the result of his aching heart needing desperately to touch her. To feel that she was real.

“I’ll make sure it gets to him,” he said, slinging the kefta over his arm. The door hovered, half-open between them. “Sleep well, Miss Starkov.”

“You as well,” she said.

The door shut with a click, leaving him alone. Always alone. The corridor was empty, so there were no witnesses to see how he lingered, his hand hovering over the door handle. Separated from her by the distance of a few feet and a thousand miles.

Eventually he managed to convince his uncooperative feet to move, forcing him to walk away from the door. Away from *her*.

Before long, he found himself back in his old rooms. He slung Ivan’s kefta on the back of a chair, knowing the Heartrender would find it eventually. Guided more by routine than any conscious thought, he wrote two notes - the first for the King, the second for Genya - and passed them to a messenger who would ensure they were delivered.

He walked back to his bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed. His surroundings were just as he remembered them, every detail from the softness of the black sheets to his violin sitting on a stand in one corner. It seemed too perfect to be a dream, but that was what he told himself it must be - a dream.

This day was merely the vision of a dying man - taunting him in his final moments with what could have been - so he was certain that it would all disappear once he fell asleep.

But to his surprise, he found that he did not mind if this fantasy was not meant to last. He cherished the chance to see Alina look upon him with something other than disgust in her

eyes. It was the most precious gift that he could imagine, and it was certainly more than he deserved.

His mind somewhat at peace, he lay down and closed his eyes. When sleep finally embraced him he dreamed of sunlight slipping through his fingers.

Pulling the puzzles apart

Chapter Notes

Guess what? It's Friday!

You absolutely blew me away with the response to the first chapter. I love you all, and you really do inspire me to write.

I hope this chapter lives up to expectations.

For the second time in two days, Aleksander awoke with a gasp.

His heart pounded against his chest as he wrenched upright, throwing off the tangled sheets that he could swear were suffocating him. Breathing ragged, he stared around wildly, trying to take in his surroundings.

To his utter confusion his room looked just the same as it had the previous night, the only difference being that it was now bathed in the soft light of morning.

Impossible. He had been so sure that this strange dream would have only lasted a single day. And yet, here he was. Still alive. Still breathing.

Disoriented, he stood up from the bed and began to pace across the length of the room. As he walked the cold from the floor seeped into his bare feet, grounding him.

If this was not a dream - not a vision - then his only conclusion was that this was somehow *real*. The words *time travel* flitted across his mind, and he almost snarled in frustration at such a preposterous idea. And yet his mind could come up with no other explanation for why he was still here.

Fine, he told himself. Until he received evidence to the contrary, he would assume that what was happening was indeed real. But he refused to be an idle spectator. Yesterday he had proved that events were not fixed in stone - he had safely delivered Alina to the Little Palace without her having to experience the terror of a Fjerdan ambush - so it stood to reason that he was capable of changing more.

There was so much he wanted to change, that he scarcely knew where to begin.

Alina, fleeing from the Little Palace in the dead of night once she discovered who he was.

Alina, staring at him in horror, a collar of bone encircling her neck.

Alina, begging for the lives of those who had tried to kill her, as he unleashed the true power of the Fold.

Alina. Alina. Alina.

Every choice, every eventuality, it all led back to her.

His pacing faltered as he felt a familiar tug on his chest. The tether taunting him with the knowledge that she was thinking of him as well. If he wanted to, he could go to her now. Appear before her without even having to take a single step in her direction. The urge to see her was almost irresistible. He wanted to look upon her again, to prove to himself that she was safe. But he knew it would only frighten her, and that was the last thing he wanted to do.

He stalked back into the war room, searching for something to keep his mind busy. There was still at least an hour before he would need to meet Alina for the presentation, so he resolved to pass the time by brushing up on the state of the war. The reports were dull, but informative, and by the time the hour was up he had familiarised himself with everything he needed to know as General of the Second Army.

He steeled himself before stepping out of his rooms, his hands running over the fabric of his kefta several times in an attempt to smooth out imaginary wrinkles. It would be fine. He was a centuries-old, immortal Shadow Summoner - he would be capable of holding a conversation with *her* without falling apart.

The corridors were empty as he made his way to the entrance of the Little Palace, guided almost unconsciously by a gentle tug on his heart. Eventually he found her, her voice reaching him before he could lay eyes upon her.

“Stupid thing,” Alina muttered from around a corner.

He had to pause to school the bemused smile from his face before she came into view. When he finally rounded the corner, it was to the sight of her petulantly tugging at the ridiculous golden veil that covered her face.

“Stop that!” scolded Genya, batting Alina’s hands away from the veil. “No one can see you before King Pyotr does.”

Even with her face obscured by the veil, Aleksander could easily distinguish the pout that Alina wore as her hands dropped to her side. Genya noticed him as he stepped closer to the two women, giving him a nod in greeting before she slipped away down a side passage.

He moved to stand next to Alina now that they were alone. “Good morning,” he said, trying to keep his tone light.

“Good morning.” She pulled the veil away from her face, looking up at him with bright eyes as she greeted him.

Together they stepped through the doors of the Little Palace. The Grand Palace loomed over them in all of its hideousness. Alina snorted as she looked up at the imposing building.

"It's rather ugly, isn't it?" she said jokingly.

"Extremely," he replied, unable to keep the smile off of his face.

He struggled to decide what to say next. Questions swirled in his mind, begging to be voiced. *Did you dream of me like I dreamed of you? Why were you thinking of me this morning? How can I make you happy?*

"How was your rest?" he asked her instead. A safe question.

"Pleasant," she said, unaware of his inner turmoil. "Thank you for sending Genya this morning. She was very helpful."

"I'm glad," he said. "I want you to be happy here."

She hummed in acknowledgement. Then she glanced towards him with an uncertain expression, biting her lip gently. He certainly did not stare at the way her bottom lip tinged red from where she caught it between her teeth.

"You have a question?" he asked, throat slightly dry all of a sudden for no reason at all.

She nodded slightly and ceased biting at her lip. "Why does Genya wear a white kefta? I've never seen a Grisha wear that colour before."

That was not a question he thought she might ask. He considered his response carefully before answering. "Genya works in service to the Queen. As such, she wears the colours of the Grand Palace."

Alina glanced away from him. "That sounds like it would be an honour - to serve the Queen." There was an undeniable question to her tone.

For a moment he considered deflecting from her query, or even spinning some outright fabrication that would disguise the truth of Genya's circumstances. But he discarded the idea - there would be no more half truths from him, and certainly no more lies.

"It is not a role she would have chosen for herself," he admitted. "But unfortunately the Royal family can be difficult when asked to relinquish something - or someone - they consider to be theirs to control."

She looked surprised by his admission, her eyes wide as she blinked up at him. For a moment it looked like she might press him further, but instead she changed the subject.

"So... what am I expected to do at this presentation?"

He let out a minuscule sigh of relief at the easier question.

"The King will expect a display of your summoning," he said, before rushing to add. "But you don't need to worry. I will help you draw on your powers, just like in Kribirsk. You won't be alone in there."

At that point they passed through the threshold of the Grand Palace, entering into the foyer where a large group of Grisha were already assembled. Alina seemed slightly overwhelmed by the crowd, her eyes darting between faces rapidly. Again that overwhelming urge to offer her his hand surged within him, but this time he quashed it, instead merely gesturing for her to walk past the group and towards the large doors that led into the throne room.

Alina pulled the lace veil back over her face just before the doors opened. He sensed her inhale a deep breath and square her shoulders beside him as the throne room came into view. Side-by-side they descended the stairs, only stopping once they were stood in the centre of the room. Already he could see that all eyes were on Alina - Grisha, courtiers, and of course the King and Queen.

The King made a lazy gesture with two fingers. At the King's silent order, Alina removed her veil gracefully, before passing it to a nearby servant. Aleksander stared up at Pyotr as the man lounged on his throne. A twist of fury settled in his stomach.

There are many things I regret from my first life, thought Aleksander, killing you is not one of them.

"I thought she'd be taller," said the King, unaware of Aleksander's murderous brooding.

"I thought she was Shu," the Queen added. "Well, I guess she's Shu enough." She gestured to a serving girl nearby. "Tell her... Oh, I don't know... good morning."

Aleksander's mood soured further at the callous comments towards Alina. He opened his mouth, a sharp retort on the tip of his tongue. However before he could speak, he was interrupted by Alina from where she stood next to him.

"My native language is Ravkan, moya tsaritsa," she said, with a polite smile on her face, disguising her discomfort at the Queen's insult.

The Queen seemed slightly taken aback by Alina's response as she sputtered. "Then, what are you?"

"My name is Alina Starkov." She did not skip a beat before responding, her chin tilted in determination as her voice rang out across the throne room. "And I am the Sun Summoner."

Stepping into the situation, Aleksander spoke up from beside her. "She is the future," he said, his voice equally raised.

He raised his hand, letting the shadows surge from every corner, until the entire room was bathed entirely in darkness. Alina held his gaze steady as he stepped in front of her, the rest of the world melting away as she looked into his eyes. Not knowing if he was reassuring her or himself, he nodded his head slightly. There was the slightest quirk upwards in the corner of her lips as she nodded back.

Then she reached out and took his hand.

His breath caught in his throat as he felt her fingers intertwine with his, and a feeling that everything was right in the world washed through him.

Light burst out from her skin, forming a golden dome that enveloped the two of them. The glow of her skin was so bright that it should have been blinding, but he was unable to look away, transfixed instead by the smile that illuminated her face - more brilliant than the sun itself. He knew that the cause of her smile was because of the feeling of her power rushing through her, but he wanted to pretend, just for a moment, that instead her smile was for him.

Eventually she let him go, their fingers slipping away from each other as he reluctantly withdrew his hand.

The world came back into focus to the sound of thunderous applause. The King was on his feet, a greedy look on his face.

“How long will she need?” he demanded.

In an instant, the fury that had been banished by Alina’s light was back inside Aleksander’s stomach as he turned to look up at the King. “If she is to destroy the Fold, then she will need much time to train,” he said as if he was talking to an impatient child. “She will remain undisturbed at the Little Palace. Understand?”

“Then train her quickly,” demanded Pyotr. “Our wars have been a noble pursuit, but this chatter from the West about becoming a sovereign nation, that needs to stop. The sooner we are one country again, the better.”

“Agreed, moi tsar.” The title left a bitter taste on Aleksander’s tongue. He bowed in a false show of respect before turning back towards Alina.

She stepped up to meet him and once more took hold of his hand. The sensation of her hand in his was entirely distracting, but he could not complain. There was little he would not do for her, if it meant she might continue to touch him without fear.

“You were magnificent,” he said. The admiration in his tone was entirely genuine.

She smiled as the two of them began to walk away from the thrones. “I don’t think I can take all the credit,” she teased lightly. “We make a good team.”

There was a lump in his throat the size of a mountain. “Indeed,” he managed to say, hoping she did not detect the tightness in his voice.

By this point they had reached the group of excitedly waiting Grisha. He reluctantly pulled his hand away before stepping away to let the crowd descend on Alina. She was immediately swept into a hug by a Squaller - Nadia was it?

Satisfied that she was in good hands - and deliberately ignoring the twinge of jealousy that he felt at the sight of others receiving Alina’s attention - he slipped past the group and back up the stairs. Before he left the room, he permitted himself once lingering glance back, to see Alina, a beaming smile on her face as she was embraced by the crowd.

Later that day Aleksander found himself sitting at his desk, pondering the events of the morning.

For the first time since he had awoken in this strange time, it was not thoughts of Alina that were weighing on his mind. No, his mind was instead stuck on Alina's words about Genya.

Aleksander had always justified Genya's predicament to himself as a necessary evil. The information she managed to pass to him from the Grand Palace had long been invaluable and having someone close to the King had proved especially useful when the time came to finally put Pyotr down. But deep in his heart Aleksander had always known that none of it was worth the pain that he had left her to endure.

There had been no excuse for his inaction, but that did not mean that he could not seek to change her situation now.

With a sigh, he stood up and walked to the bookshelf that disguised the hidden tunnel that led to his storage room. The dusty vault held an eclectic collection of items from throughout his centuries of existence, but there was one, more recent, addition that he was interested in at this moment.

His feet brought him to stand in front of a small crate, tucked away innocuously in one corner. He pushed it open and with careful hands pulled out the object within. The red kefta adorned with blue embroidery stared up at him, judging him. He had commissioned it secretly in a fit of guilt, not long after he had first heard of the horrors that Genya faced within the walls of the Grand Palace. However, his guilt had not been enough to convince him to put a stop to it all, so here the kefta had stayed, collecting dust, until its rightful owner would be free to wear it at last.

He brought the kefta back into the War Room, laying it carefully on his desk, before closing the door to the tunnel securely behind him. Then he turned on his heel and began to stride towards the Grand Palace.

It was time to do what he should have done years ago.

Predictably Pyotr made a show of forcing Aleksander to wait before he would be granted an audience. This was despite the fact that Aleksander knew for a fact that the King was spending the day doing nothing other than drinking and blustering over the Sun Summoner's discovery.

Once Aleksander was finally permitted an audience, he had to school his face to prevent his disgust from showing at the stench of alcohol that clung to the audience chamber.

"General," said the King loudly from his seat on the cushioned throne at the opposite end of the room.

“Moi tsar.” Aleksander bowed just low enough to not be an overt insult. “I need to speak with you on the state of the war.”

“Out with it. I have no wish to be bored by talk of politics when today is supposed to be my day of triumph.”

“My apologies for interrupting your celebrations.” Sorry was the last emotion that Aleksander was feeling. “The Sun Summoner’s discovery has shifted the balance of conflict and it would be pertinent for us to gain control of the situation quickly.”

The King took another swig from the glass that he was holding, while gesturing with the other hand for Aleksander to continue talking.

“Our enemies will have already heard of Miss Starkov’s appearance. As you are well aware, the prospect of the Fold being destroyed will be a great boon to Ravka, and will therefore also severely weaken our enemies’ positions. Fear of this advantage is likely to cause them to change their plans. To act irrationally.” Aleksander kept his tone neutral in the face of the King’s obvious disinterest. “This is why I am proposing that the Second Army increase the number of spy’s deployed to both Fjerda and Shu-Han. Information is more valuable than gunpowder in the matter of war.”

“Fine, fine,” said the King. “Why does this need me? You’ve never bothered me in the past with the details of the Second Army.”

“I must make a request of you, moi tsar,” said Aleksander carefully. “There is currently one member of the Second Army who has valuable skills that are not being best utilised.” He took a deep breath. “I ask that you release Miss Safin from your wife’s service. Her unique talents make her the ideal candidate for a spy, able to infiltrate any compound undetected. Just like the Sun Summoner, she will need further training before she can reach her full potential, but I believe that with her behind enemy lines we would be able to end these wars much sooner once the Fold is destroyed.”

The King held Aleksander’s gaze with a distinct look of disdain. “My wife will not be pleased to lose the girl. She has grown used to the services she provides.”

Both men were aware of the words that were not being said. Aleksander did not blink - would not blink - as he stared down the King of Ravka. A long moment passed as both men waited to see who would cave first.

“Take her,” said the King. He waved his hand dismissively, but Aleksander could tell from the clench of his jaw that Pyotr was furious. But there was nothing the pathetic man could do. He was obviously unwilling to admit out loud his reasons for wanting to keep the Tailor under his thumb.

“Thank you, moi tsar,” said Aleksander. His face was composed into a perfect canvas of neutrality, no hint of a smile in his expression. “I will leave you to your celebrations.”

With that Aleksander turned and strode out of the room. The King had kept his head today, but if he put a single toe out of line then Aleksander would not hesitate to put him down.

His Grisha would be safe - all of them - he would make sure of it.

The sun had just begun to set by the time Aleksander heard the anticipated knock at his door to the War Room.

"You wanted to see me?" Genya lingered just outside of the threshold, a wary expression on her face.

He inhaled a long breath before standing and walking the short distance to the door.

"Yes, please come in," he said, gesturing for her to step inside. Once she had entered he closed the door behind her. This conversation deserved privacy.

She stood to attention, back straight in her pristine white kefta. The perfect image of a soldier. There may not be many in the Little Palace who would agree, but he knew that Genya was just as much a soldier as any Grisha on the front lines, perhaps even more of one.

"Is this about Miss Starkov?" she asked after a beat of silence had passed between them.

"No," he said. "This is about you, and your position here."

There was a flash of nervousness in Genya's eyes at his words, although she did not move an inch, maintaining perfect composure. Aleksander winced internally and continued hurriedly.

"Genya, you are my best spy. You have played your part perfectly all these years, but it's a part that you should have never had to bear, and for that I am sorry."

She continued to say nothing, but her shoulders dropped a fraction at his admission.

"I have wronged you, deeply, by turning a blind eye to what you have been forced to endure," he continued. "I should have never let the Queen take you from the Little Palace, and I absolutely should have pulled you out as soon as the King laid his hands on you."

She flinched slightly. A shimmer of tears welled in her eyes.

"I can't take back the years of pain, but I can make sure it will never happen again" His voice took on an edge of steel. "I promise that you will get your revenge. His day of reckoning will come soon, but until then he will not touch you."

Genya's expression shifted into one of disbelief. Her breathing picked up as she clearly fought to maintain composure. Aleksander continued on, needing to finish his speech.

"Effective immediately you have been removed from your position as servant to the Queen. You are officially recognised as a soldier of the Second Army, with all of the privileges and protection that the position provides."

He walked past her and into his study, picking up the red and blue kefta from his desk. Before returning to the main room, he waited for a few seconds to allow Genya to compose herself.

When he walked back over to her, the tears had gone although her eyes were still slightly red.

He offered her the kefta. She reached out, but didn't touch it immediately, her fingers hovering over the fabric reverently. After a moment of hesitation, she took it from him, her eyes meeting his in a look of grief and gratitude.

"I don't know what to say," she said quietly.

"You don't have to say anything," he said. "I do not ask for your forgiveness or your thanks. This is merely what I should have done from the start."

She nodded hesitantly. A beat of silence passed before she spoke. "What are my new orders, if I am to no longer spy on the Royal family?"

"That is for you to decide," he said. "If you wish, I can have you assigned away from Os Alta - if staying here is too painful. Alternatively, you can stay at the Little Palace and continue your education. The choice is yours."

"I want to stay," she said quickly.

His lips twitched upwards in a small smile. "I'm glad. Then, if you're amenable, there is something I would ask of you."

"What would that be?" she asked with slight trepidation.

He sighed. It was entirely his own fault that everyone around him seemed to expect the worst from him. "Miss Starkov may find it a challenging transition to move from the First Army to the Second. I would appreciate it greatly if you could lend her some support to help her feel welcome."

Genya smiled. Clearly she had already succumbed to Alina's charms. "I can do that. I suppose you'll want reports on her progress?"

"No, there's no need for that. Just, it would be good if she could have a friend here," he said.

"Of course. It would be my pleasure."

"Thank you. That will be all."

She bowed and turned to leave. Before she could step through the door he called out on impulse.

"Genya." He watched as she paused, but she did not turn around. "For what it is worth... I'm sorry."

She did not acknowledge his admission, merely continued walking. The red kefta was clutched in her hands, her knuckles white as she gripped it. He waited for the door to close before he turned and slumped into the chair at his desk.

It was not nearly enough. But it was a start.

Only an hour or two later Aleksander found himself feeling restless. His pen tapped uselessly against the missive he was supposed to be writing, the words on the page blurring together in his vision. With a huff he stood up and started towards the drinks cabinet that held his whiskey. Getting drunk was a truly terrible idea in his current state of mind, but the itch to numb his racing thoughts was persistent.

He took two steps away from his desk, but then he was distracted by a tug in his chest. His entire body went stiff at the reminder of the connection that anchored him to Alina. The tether pulled tight again, almost as if she was calling for him.

The idea was ridiculous. She had no idea the tether even existed, let alone its capabilities. It was more likely that the action was unconscious on her part, just as it had been that morning. Still, he could not resist the urge to see her, to look upon her face once more and see that she was real.

So that was how he found himself wandering through the corridors of the Little Palace, once more guided by the invisible string wrapped around his heart. It was not long before he reached his destination as the sound of chatter and laughter drifted his way from the dining hall.

Before he stepped into view of the room, he called his shadows to him, bathing him in a wash of darkness that would ensure that he remained unseen to those within. Then he slowly stepped towards the door so that he could see into the dining hall.

As always, his eyes went first to Alina. She was shining like the sun even without the use of her powers, her face illuminated by a brilliant smile, and dressed in a bright blue kefta the colour of the irises that she so loved. To her left sat Genya, dressed now in the red kefta that should have been hers from the beginning. There was a lightness to the Tailor's eyes that he had not seen before and for that he was unspeakably glad.

The table that they were sitting at was unusually crowded. As well as Genya, he could make out two Summoners from the demonstration: Marie and Nadia. Next to Genya sat the Durast, David, who did not seem to be saying much, but even Aleksander noticed how David sometimes glanced towards Genya with a look of awe on his face. Fedyor was also sitting with Alina, much to the obvious chagrin of Ivan, who was glowering at the group from across the room. Aleksander was not sure if Ivan was more annoyed about temporarily losing Fedyor's attention, or at the breach of protocol with so many Grisha from different orders sat together.

The only person in the room who looked less impressed than Ivan at the scene was Zoya. Aleksander spied the Squaller sitting at the other end of the Etherealki table, a murderous expression on her face. He watched as she stabbed a piece of pheasant with her fork with much more force than necessary. He sighed. That was one more problem he knew he needed to deal with.

At that moment, Alina said something that had her whole table roaring in laughter. It seemed that she had already captured the group in her orbit, her effortless charm and easy-going personality endearing her to them in record time. The sight put a smile on Aleksander's face - this was what she needed. Friends. *True* friends. That were not burdened by his orders to spy on her, torn between loyalty to him and their love for her.

He stayed there, hidden in shadows for longer than entirely necessary, but he was unable to pull himself away from the sight of Alina looking so carefree and happy.

She was listening to Fedyor as he began to tell a story, the words far too muffled from the distance for Aleksander to make out any details of their conversation. Aleksander watched as her eyes roamed over the group, before inexplicably they seemed to land on the spot where he was standing.

His breath caught in his throat even as he told himself that it was impossible that she could see him, disguised as he was by his shadows. And yet, somehow her eyes met his. He stood motionless, trapped in her gaze. Waiting for what, he did not know. Then her expression flickered. She smiled at him, the sight more beautiful than any sunset over the True Sea.

His heart pounded almost painfully against his ribcage. And then as quickly as the moment had started, it stopped. She looked away, turning back towards Fedyor as the Hearttender finished his story.

Aleksander did the only thing he could. He fled.

Questions of science

Chapter Notes

Another Friday – another chapter!

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next morning found Aleksander once more sitting at his desk waiting for a knock at the door.

“Come in,” he said, looking up from the report he was reading to see Zoya standing expectantly at the threshold of his study.

She breezed into the room, projecting a familiar confidence that he knew that she had never managed to lose. Not even after everything.

“You summoned me?” she said.

“Yes, please have a seat.” His tone was stiff, hopefully conveying that this was not a social call.

She took the chair on the other side of the desk, watching him with a curious expression on her face. She said nothing as she waited for him to speak.

“Zoya, I believe that you have the potential to be promoted to lieutenant in the near future. Obviously, your summoning is well-practised, but there is more to command than just the Small Science. Which is why I would like to offer you the chance to develop those other skills.”

Her back straightened as an eager expression crossed her face. He was not unaware of the way Zoya’s mind worked - she had always had a desperate need to prove herself as competent, and Aleksander had taken full advantage of that fact in the past. A need for validation was easy to twist into loyalty, and that was something with which he had lifetimes of experience with.

He resisted the urge to sigh. It was time for Zoya to stand on her own two feet, rather than being beholden only to him.

“I have a mission for you,” he said. “The political situation in Novokribirsk has been simmering for a long time now, and I believe it will not be long before it reaches a boiling point. I would like you to be my eyes and ears on the ground there, to keep me informed of any troubling developments.”

"Of course. I won't let you down."

"Good. I would expect nothing less," he said. "How familiar are you with the city?"

"Very familiar. I have family there," she said.

Aleksander fought hard against the urge to flinch at her words, the sudden memory of her horrified face when he had decimated Novokribirsk filling his mind. One more item to add to the already endless list of his crimes.

"That's good." He had to force out the words through his dry throat, but fortunately Zoya did not seem to notice the change in his tone. "There is one more task I have for you while you're in Novokribirsk."

"Yes?"

"There is an undercover operative currently working in West Ravka. She is to be recalled to the Little Palace, but I have been having trouble getting in contact with her. I would like you to find her and pass on her new orders." he said.

Zoya nodded. "Who is the spy?"

"A Heartrender by the name of Nina Zenik."

She smiled. "I know Nina, we were in a lot of the same classes growing up. I'll find her," she said confidently.

"Thank you, Zoya. Ivan will brief you on the finer details of your mission. You're dismissed."

She stood up and gave a short bow before turning and exiting the study. He waited until he could be sure that she was out of earshot before he slumped down into his chair with a sigh. It was hard to know if he was making the right decisions.

Supposedly this would kill two birds with one stone. His main objective from the moment he had reawoken in this strange timeline would always be to prevent harm from befalling Alina. This way she would not have to deal with Zoya trying to antagonise her at every opportunity.

But his motivation wasn't solely for Alina's sake. He had to respect Zoya, she was one of the first to stand opposed to him when the devastating effects of his plans had unfolded. He was not being untruthful when he told her that she had great potential, and in the pit of his stomach he knew that he needed people that were willing to challenge him. Willing to stop him if he once more took everything too far.

Nina's fate had remained a mystery to him. The last he had heard of her had been Fedyor's report that she had been captured by Druskelle. He supposed that it was likely she had met her death either in the frigid seas or on a Fjerdan pyre. Hopefully Zoya would manage to intercept her before she would be left to either fate.

Rolling his shoulders to loosen some of the tension that had gathered there, he sat up and cast his eyes back to the report he had been reading before Zoya had appeared. He would have to save his musing on the past and future for later. For now, he was a general, and there was work to be done.

As the days passed by, Aleksander found himself falling into an uneasy routine. By day, he was the picture of the perfect general. It was surprisingly easy to lead an army when you could perfectly anticipate the enemy's movements. He moved his soldiers about as necessary, reinforcing areas that they could not afford to lose and tactically retreating from areas that they had no hope to keep hold of.

The nights were infinitely more difficult to manage. His sleep grew ever more restless as the days passed by. Dreams and nightmares blending into one another when he could finally succumb to sleep, for nothing was more painful to him than the reminder of what he could not have. What he could never have.

In his waking hours, he saw relatively little of Alina. She smiled at him when they passed each other on occasion, each fleeting glimpse of her sending his heart racing. Although at least it seemed that of all the Heartrenders in the Little Palace, only Ivan had noticed his reaction to her presence.

Of course, Ivan would never say anything to his face. But he had caught the man rolling his eyes in Aleksander's direction whenever his heart pounded a little too loudly at Alina's presence. Aleksander would have been more annoyed at his second's insubordination, if Ivan hadn't taken to delivering a cup of chamomile tea with his evening report.

The tea helped a little with his sleep, even if it was not nearly enough to overcome the strength of his nightmares. But still, Aleksander was grateful for the gesture, and he was sure to thank Ivan with each delivery. Much to the man's obvious surprise.

Sometimes, Aleksander would spot Alina walking the gardens, normally accompanied by one of her numerous friends. It seemed that there were few residents of the Little Palace that she had yet to charm. He tried not to stare whenever he caught a glimpse of her through the window to his study, lest he never get any work done, but it was hard to resist the sight of her, seemingly at ease in her place at the Little Palace.

It was a sunny morning when his routine was interrupted by the arrival of an unassuming letter. It sat on his desk, one more taunting reminder of the failures of his past.

Unbeknownst to Alina, the Little Palace received hundreds of letters addressed to the Sun Summoner. Most of them were destined only for the furnace, the ones that only contained demands for blessings or prayers from Ravka's prophesied saviour. But he had made sure to retrieve this letter before it could be destroyed.

It had arrived exactly when he had predicted, the unassuming letter addressed in untidy lettering not to the Sun Summoner, but to *Alina Starkov, Assistant Cartographer, Royal Corps of Surveyors*. The scribbled words sent a twinge of annoyance through him - she was no mere

map maker, just as she no longer belonged to the First Army - but he suppressed the emotion. This was not about him.

He did not open the letter, a pointless gesture given that he already knew its contents, but he wanted to start how he meant to go on. And if that meant letting Alina receive the letters from her tracker, then so be it.

He handed the letter to Genya as they passed in the corridor later that morning.

“You may pass any letters Miss Starkov has written directly to the postmaster,” he said to her as she took the tracker’s letter from him.

She nodded. “Alina hasn’t written any yet, but I’ll let her know that the option is open to her,” she said before continuing on to the dining hall for breakfast.

Aleksander was left standing uselessly in the corridor. Fortunately, there was no one around to see the confused expression on his face. *Where were the letters?* The first time, she had written almost a dozen letters by this point. Her attachment to the tracker had been a constant source of frustration to him, but now he was to believe that she had let him go so easily.

It did not make any sense.

But there was nothing he could do to solve the mystery. He could hardly walk up to Alina and ask her why she had not been writing to her tracker, and he was unwilling to demand that Genya investigate for him. So, for now the conundrum would remain unsolved.

The nightmare that had trapped him was a familiar one: Alina staring up at him, a look of abject terror on her face as she clawed at the collar of bone that wrapped around her throat. Suffocating her.

He awoke with a start, heart pounding and breathing laboured. It took him several minutes of carefully counting his breaths to calm his body enough for it to return to a normal state of function.

Releasing a huff of air, he brought his arm up to cover his eyes, hoping he could block out everything - the world, the past, his memories. The sleeve of his shirt was damp from tears that he had not realised had started to fall. He screwed his eyes shut, but that only made things worse as the sight of Alina clawing at her throat seemed to be seared into the backs of his eyelids.

There was not a single part of him that considered collaring her again. The thought was inconceivable, of that, he was sure. After all, that had been his point of no return when it came to Alina.

If he had just *talked* to her. He could have explained himself and there might have been a chance - however impossibly slim - that she might have understood. But once he fused that chain of bone around her neck, there was no going back.

He had signed his doom with her blood.

The minutes ticked by, marked only by the sound of his still laboured breathing. He tried to tell his traitorous mind to focus on other things - he could not change the past and he would not let the future follow the same melody as before. But despite his best efforts, his mind would not quiet.

Knowing sleep would evade him for a while longer he threw the covers off of him and stood up. He shrugged on a robe and slipped his feet into a pair of boots before exiting his rooms.

He did not know where he was heading, but his heart told him that he needed to walk. He wandered mindlessly through the corridors, the only sound the soft tap of his footsteps against the tiled floor. A glance out of one of the many windows told him that it was past midnight and fortunately for him he encountered no one on his aimless journey.

He was almost considering returning to his rooms when he was brought out of his melancholy by the sight of light filtering from around a bend in the corridor. Approaching cautiously, he stepped around the corner to see that the light was coming from the library, which was not empty as it should have been at this late hour.

His breath caught in his throat as he saw exactly who was using the library at this time of night. *Alina*.

A great pile of books surrounded her as she sat engrossed in a heavy tome. From his distance he could only make out a few of the titles, but it was easy enough to see that they spanned a wide range of topics. There were books on Grisha theory, from basic to advanced lessons; texts on the politics of both Shu-Han and Fjerda; and many books on Ravkan history, going back what looked like hundreds of years.

Alina was illuminated by only a single oil lamp, and he worried that she might be straining her eyes trying to read in the dim light. However, he could not complain about the way the flickering light danced across her face, casting her complexion in an almost ethereal glow. Her hair was loose, cascading in midnight waves over her shoulders, and she was dressed not in her iris blue kefta, but instead in a familiar lace dress and velvet robe.

He should have retreated immediately, but he was frozen in place, unable to move even the tips of his fingers. No sound came from him, but Alina noticed his presence regardless as she looked up from her book, a ponderous expression on her face.

Their eyes met and for a long moment it seemed to Aleksander that there was nothing else in this world than the way she looked at him. She hesitated for a moment, almost as if she was caught in the same spell that had bewitched him, before she opened her mouth to speak.

“General,” she said, her voice soft and lyrical even as the title struck a discordant note in his heart.

Aleksander, he wanted to say, *call me Aleksander*. But those were not the words that left his lips. “Am I disturbing you?” he asked, feeling that he must look as much a fool as he knew himself to be on the inside.

Her lips twitched upwards into a small smile, an almost fond expression crossing her face. "Not at all," she said. "Can't sleep?"

He shook his head, stepping closer to her now that she had given him permission to stay. Now that he was nearer he could make out the title of the book that she was reading. *A Social History of Ravka*. It was one of the more unbiased accounts of Ravkan history, written by a scholar at the University of Ketterdam almost two hundred years ago.

"What about you?" he asked. "It's very late to be up reading."

She sighed, glancing down at the book in front of her before closing it. "Coming here at night gives me the space to think. I can let myself forget about what everyone expects from me." Her hands twisted in her lap as she stared down at the book's cover. "There's so much I don't know. So much I need to understand."

"Alina..." He struggled to find the right words to say. "You have time to figure these things out, and no one expects you to have all the answers."

"I've wasted so much time already," she muttered, almost bitterly, before she looked up into his eyes once more, the lamplight reflecting like stars in her pupils. "How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?"

"How do you keep going, knowing so many are counting on you to do what's best?" she asked hesitantly.

He paused for a long moment, before sighing. "For a long time I believed that I was the only one capable of making those decisions, and that conviction powered me through."

"And now?"

"Now, I've realised that none of it was enough." He attempted a smile, but it came out strained. "Just like you, there's an awful lot more I need to learn, a lot more I need to do."

For a moment, he was once more consumed by the guilt that had plagued him since he had reawoken. The never-ending list of all of the wrongs he needed to make right loomed over him. But then he was startled out of his brooding by fingertips gently reaching out to touch his hand.

Gently, Alina took hold of his hand. He could feel the thrum of her power underneath her skin, grounding him, reminding him to stay in the present.

"Maybe there are things we could learn together?" Her voice was soft. Hopeful.

As much as it pained him, he extracted his hand from her touch. He was not worthy of her empathy.

"Perhaps another night," he said. His heart was too raw to spend any more time in her presence this night, lest he confess too much that he would only regret.

He turned away and began to walk towards the door, but he was stopped by her voice calling out to him.

“I know you may not believe it, but you are not alone.”

He didn’t turn around, not wanting her to see the tears that had gathered in the corners of his eyes. “Oh, Alina,” he said, his voice thick with grief. “If only that were true.”

Before she could respond, he swept out of the room, leaving him - and her - once more alone.

If he heard the hitch of a breath behind him, then it was surely just his imagination.

Chapter End Notes

What did you think? Feel free to yell at me with your thoughts and theories. I am absolutely loving reading all of your comments.

A few notes from me:

I have a mixed view on Zoya. I think she has potential to be a really interesting character, but certainly in the show she comes across as really immature. So I’m giving her the chance to get away from the Little Palace and grow up a bit. Hopefully that helps.

Also, sorry to all the Helnik fans! But from Aleksander’s point of view, being captured by Druskelle is not a nice experience. So as far as he knows, he’s doing Nina a favour.

See you all next Friday! (I’m particularly fond of the next chapter)

Science and progress

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

I am so glad it's the weekend. I've only got one more week before my exams start, and this story and your encouragement is keeping me sane through all of the studying.

I hope you enjoy this chapter, and if you do then please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aleksander resolved to stay away from Alina following their late-night encounter in the library. She didn't need him, after all - not like he needed her. It was important that she find her own way and stand on her own two feet, without being hidden by his shadow.

His resolve lasted precisely one week.

The nightmare was different this time. In his dream he could do nothing but watch as Alina was devoured by his Nichevo'ya, the horrifying shadow creatures tearing her apart as she screamed for mercy. His throat was hoarse from his own screaming as he desperately begged for the creatures to stop, but no matter how much he screamed they would not obey him.

You're dreaming, something told him as he thrashed against the invisible restraints that had him in their grip, but it was no use. Even aware of his sleeping, he could not will himself to wake. He was not strong enough to free himself from the prison of his mind.

Wake up, came the voice again, *it's alright. Just wake up.*

Somehow, he finally managed to wrench himself from sleep. He awoke with a barely muffled scream, his knuckles white as he scrambled to throw the sheets off him. The room was too hot and too cold at the same time. No matter how much he willed his racing heart to calm, it refused to obey him.

Fruitlessly he lay back down and closed his eyes, but it was to no effect. Sleep would not come.

I just need to see her, he told himself, *I just need to know that she's safe.*

Mind made up, he threw on a robe and shoes before slipping silently out of his rooms. He began to walk towards the Vezda suite, but before he could take more than a dozen paces, a soft tug on his heart gave him pause.

Obediently, he obeyed the call of the tether that grasped at his soul, letting it guide him towards the library once more. He rounded the last corner, the door to the library coming into view. It was half ajar, soft light spilling across the threshold. Carefully, he inched closer to the door to see Alina once more seated at the central table, surrounded by a pile of books.

The breath that he had not realised he had been holding escaped him once he lay his eyes upon her. The sound must have alerted Alina to his presence because she immediately turned her head to look in his direction. Her face bloomed into a smile when she saw him.

“General Kirigan. It’s good to see you.” Her voice was quiet, but even so it carried across the silent library. “You don’t need to linger, you know? You can come in.”

In all things he was helpless to disobey her, so he stepped inside. This time there was a second chair at the table, and she pulled it out, gesturing for him to take a seat.

He sank into the seat. “Thank you,” he said. Now that he was close, he could see that she had moved on from her previous book, although the one she was reading now was unfamiliar to him. “What are you reading?”

“It’s called *The Foundations of Modern Ravka*.” She flipped to the front page where the title was prominently displayed. “It’s terribly dry I’m afraid, but it seems to be a fairly comprehensive summary of the events of the last one-hundred and fifty years or so.”

He nodded. “You’re very dedicated to your studies to be doing so much late-night reading.”

“It’s not my studies I’m worried about,” she said with a laugh that sounded more self-deprecating than humorous.

“What is it that you’re worried about?”

She looked up at him, a serious look in her eyes. “I want to be more than a symbol. If I’m supposed to be the Sun Summoner, then I want to know what I’m doing and why I’m doing it. I refuse to be a puppet.”

He swallowed down the lump that formed in his throat at her declaration, the words inspiring a painful mix of pride at her and shame at himself mixing within him. “That’s wise of you.”

“I’m regretting choosing this particular book though,” she said wryly. “The author has a rather rabid obsession with the monarchy. I’m more interested in what life was like for ordinary people - particularly Grisha.”

“I might be able to help if you have any specific questions,” he said. “I’ve been around a lot longer than I know my looks suggest.” It was the truth, perhaps not the whole truth, but at least it wasn’t a lie.

Her expression turned contemplative. For a moment he was worried she might ask him exactly how old he was - he didn’t want to scare her by telling her the truth but neither did he have any desire to lie to her. Fortunately, he was saved from having to face that particular dilemma as she instead asked a different question.

“Genya said you built the Little Palace. Is that true?”

“Yes,” he said. That was public knowledge since it was something he had done under his current pseudonym. “The building itself was completed a little more than one-hundred and ten years ago, but the Second Army has existed for longer than that.”

If she was surprised by his admission that he was over a century old, she did not show it. Instead, she continued on with her questions.

“What was it like for Grisha, before the Little Palace.”

He closed his eyes briefly to try and keep his emotions in check before he answered. “It was... difficult,” he said at last. “Grisha were hunted wherever they went - the fear and hatred ran so deep that nowhere was safe.” Bile was thick in his throat, but he continued regardless. “When I say that the Little Palace is a haven, I mean that literally. There are many here that would not have made it past the age of ten if they hadn’t been brought to the Little Palace.”

Alina was seemingly rendered speechless by his words, tears pricked at the corners of her eyes as she stared at him. Several times she opened her mouth to speak before closing it again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, feeling his shoulders slump fractionally. “I did not mean to sour the mood.”

“It’s okay. Thank you for being honest with me,” she replied.

Slowly, she reached out to lay a hand atop his where it rested on the table. He fought very hard not to stare at the way her thumb began to draw small circles on his wrist.

Perhaps he should have chosen this moment to bid her goodnight and make a hasty retreat to his rooms, but he found himself wanting to stay. “Ask me something else,” he said, trying not to sound desperate. “Something easier.”

She paused for a second. “Why do the kitchens only serve herring?” she asked, a teasing edge to her voice.

He couldn’t help it. He laughed. The sound echoed off of the bookshelves, reverberating around the room. Across from him, she smiled.

“Herring,” he said, raising his chin slightly, “builds character.”

Despite his best intentions, their late-night meetings soon turned into a routine. Every night they would meet in the library once darkness had fallen, and they would talk.

Some of their discussions were serious. She asked him about the political situations with Fjerda and Shu-Han, to which he would answer her questions to the best of his ability. He

tried to impart all of his knowledge of the world, so that she might learn from him and grow stronger and wiser.

They discussed military strategy and he was surprised by how willing she was to challenge him. Her ideas were often idealistic and driven by a naivety and innocence that he had long ago shaken free from, but he had to admit that there were times that he could see the merit to her points. He knew that his plans tended to value the bigger picture at the expense of the individual, and she helped him to strike a better balance.

Perhaps he should have been concerned with the ease with which he gave away military secrets, but he could not find it in himself to care.

While their discussions on politics were insightful, and it was clear that Alina was learning a lot as the weeks passed, those were not the conversations that he treasured most. No, the conversations that he cherished were the ones where they spoke of everything and nothing. When they were not General and Soldier, but just two souls.

Under the cover of darkness, he found that his walls that had been so carefully built began crumbling down. Exposing parts of himself that he had not shown to anyone in centuries.

He learned more about Alina as well, things that he had not been privy to in his first life. Each morsel of information was stored away in his mind to be cherished.

It was wonderful. And, for the first time since he had woken up in Kribirsk, Aleksander found himself feeling... content.

“I used to want to travel the world,” said Alina following a lull in conversation over the Shu-Han front.

“Really?” said Aleksander.

“Yes. Visit the library at the University of Ketterdam. Explore the Wandering Isles. See the True Sea...” Her voice trailed off as she appeared to be lost in thought.

“Why *used to*? Do you not still want to see the world?” he asked.

She glanced at him, a cynical look in her eye. “I don’t think Saints get to take holidays.”

He shuffled in his seat so that he was facing her fully. “Alina, if you want to travel, then I promise you that you’ll be able to travel. Maybe not today. Maybe not next year. But eventually it will be safe enough for you, and you’ll be strong enough to protect yourself.”

The corner of her lips twitched upwards. “You should be careful with promises. One day you’ll make one you won’t be able to keep.”

“Believe me, I’ve meant every word that I’ve said to you.” He prayed that she did not notice the way his voice caught in his throat as he made his vow.

She hummed in acknowledgement, and he could swear that he could feel the vibrations within his very soul. “I think... I’m starting to believe you,” she said quietly.

The silence weighed between them for a moment, but it did not feel suffocating instead it felt like a weight had been lifted. Like a seed of possibility had been planted that might just bloom into something beautiful, if only it could be given the chance to grow.

Another evening, he found Alina sitting at their table in the library, her hands outstretched in front of her, fingers twitching in a practised motion. Small wisps of light connected her fingertips, shimmering slightly as her fingers moved.

“Good evening,” said Aleksander. He hovered a few feet away from her, his gaze lingering on the dancing strands of light in her hands.

She seemed startled by his presence, her hands immediately dropping to the table, the light dissipating. “Good evening.” Her expression morphed into a smile as she turned to face him. She gestured for him to take the chair next to her.

He sat down. “Your summoning is coming along well then?”

She nodded, glancing down towards her hands. “I think so? Baghra doesn’t seem very impressed with me, but I think I’m improving.”

“I wouldn’t put much stock into Baghra’s opinion. She has a very... disagreeable personality.” That was putting it mildly. “Your summoning is beautiful.” *Everything about you is beautiful.* “You deserve to be proud of it.”

“Thank you. That’s sweet of you to say.” She smiled at him. And was he imagining it or could he see a glimmer of affection in her eyes?

“Would you... show me?”

“Sure,” she said. Then she brought her hands together in a motion he distinctly remembers from his first life. When her hands parted, a glowing sun floated in between them. It was about the size of an apple, and impressively, it did not shrink or fade as she held it between her palms.

“Magnificent.” He did not try to disguise the awe in his voice. There would never come a time when Alina’s summoning would not inspire wonder within him.

She smiled coyly. “Now you’re just trying to flatter me.” The light continued to hold steady in front of her. “Baghra keeps telling me that it needs to be bigger, but there must be more that I need to learn than just summoning a larger and larger ball of light.”

“You’re right,” he said seriously. “Size isn’t everything.”

Alina snorted suddenly, the light disappearing from her hands.

“What?” His perplexed expression only made her giggle louder.

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye as she tried to regain her composure. “Sorry,” she said, still smiling. “It’s just you’re not the first man to try and tell me that.”

Oh. “That’s not what I meant, Miss Starkov.” The corner of his lips twitched upwards. Her laughter truly was infectious.

“I know. I know. Forgive me,” she said. “What were you trying to say?”

“What I was *trying* to say, is that precision is just as important as power when it comes to summoning.”

She nodded. “That makes sense. So how do I learn precision?”

“There are several exercises I can show you, if you’d like.” When she didn’t dismiss the idea, he continued. “Let’s start with this one.”

In demonstration, he brought his hands together, feeling as his shadows began to pool at his fingertips. With a flick of his wrist, the shadows scattered outwards across the top of the table. Tiny beads of darkness arranged themselves into a perfect lattice, connected by wisps of shadow so that the beads formed a net.

“The purpose of this exercise is to keep the points evenly spaced. To keep track of the whole shape even when you can’t necessarily control each individual point.”

Alina wasn’t looking at him, instead she was staring transfixed at the wisps of shadow. Cautiously, she reached one hand out, her fingers brushing against one inky tendril. In response, the lattice rippled like waves upon the ocean. “Lovely,” she said faintly.

Aleksander’s heart seized. No one had ever described his powers in such a way. He swallowed down a familiar lump in his throat - it seemed Alina would forever be leaving him speechless.

“Would you like to try?” he asked.

She looked up from the shadows, startled out of her apparent reverence. Nodding, she brought her hands together in an imitation of what he had done. When she drew her hands apart, light spilled from her fingertips, forming into tiny beads on top of his shadows. Her lattice wasn’t as large, and wasn’t quite as uniform as his own, but regardless it was an impressive first attempt.

Her nose scrunched in concentration as she held the light steady. It was the most adorable sight Aleksander had ever seen.

“Incredible,” he said. Ignoring the fluttering in his stomach. “You’re a fast learner, Alina.”

She laughed. “I assure you I’m not. But better late than never, I guess.”

“What’s your favourite flower?” He asked the question one evening over a book on the politics of the Wandering Isles.

It was not a question he necessarily needed answered, given that he was confident that he already knew what her answer would be. However, he couldn’t help but feel like he had stolen that knowledge through trickery. He found that he wanted to hear the answer from her own lips.

She did not answer immediately, her eyes taking on a distant expression as she seemed to be momentarily lost in thought. After a beat of silence, she said quietly, “Forget-me-nots.”

“Not irises?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

The distant expression on her face flickered, before vanishing, replaced by a wry smile. “What is it about me that makes people think that?” she said. “Mal always seemed to think that I loved irises, and don’t get me wrong, I do *like* them, but they’re not my favourite. But, of course, he never bothered to actually ask me. He just assumed.”

It was the first time in their conversations that she had mentioned the tracker. Aleksander tried not to sound awkward as he cleared his throat before speaking.

“So why forget-me-nots?”

An indecipherable expression crossed her face. She glanced down at her hands that had started to fidget with the hem of her sleeve.

“There was a clearing, in the woods behind the orphanage, that was entirely filled with them. I used to go there sometimes, when I needed to think. I could lay down among the flowers and watch the sun dance among the leaves above me... It was the only time I truly felt like myself,” she said softly.

She looked up from her lap, meeting his eyes once more.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” He was unsure of her meaning.

“What is your favourite flower?”

He was momentarily stunned as he considered her question. “I don’t have one,” he answered honestly. “It’s not something I’ve ever given any thought, and no one’s ever given me flowers before.”

Luda might have done, if they’d had more time together. But his time with her had been too brief, and they’d been too focused on running and hiding to take time for such small comforts.

Alina must have noticed the mournful edge to his expression because she changed the subject, drawing him out of his memories and back into the present.

The next evening, when Aleksander returned to his rooms after a long day of meetings, he found a small vase sitting innocently on the table next to his bed, filled with an assortment of yellow daffodils. There was no note, but there could be no question as to who had left them for him.

He raised the bunch to his nose, inhaling the sweet scent as he considered the unexpected gift.

Perhaps he had a favourite flower after all.

“Is there anything you’re scared of?” asked Alina.

He glanced up from the map in front of him, their eyes meeting. “I’m only a man.” He chuckled lightly before glancing back down so that he would no longer have to look her in the eye. “I’m scared of lots of things,” he said softly.

It was true. There was so much that he feared - his dreams were proof enough of that. Night after night he was tormented by the worst of his past, as well as horrors that could have come to be. But above all of that, his biggest fear was that he was truly incapable of change - that he was doomed to make the same mistakes twice, unable to free himself from a torment of his own making.

But he could hardly tell Alina that.

“When I was younger, I was afraid of the dark.” He spoke carefully, trying hard to keep his tone sounding nonchalant.

“Really?” asked Alina.

“Yes.” He glanced back up to find her looking at him with a curious expression on her face. “It took me many years to learn how to control my shadows. Before that, they would... follow me... whether I wanted them to or not.”

“I never would have guessed,” she said. Her tone was sympathetic, and he searched for anything that might show her to be disingenuous, but he found nothing.

“Once I learned how to control my summoning, the fear subsided. And it’s been a long time since I’ve found anything to fear from the dark.”

She nodded. “I must admit, I’ve been scared of a lot of things. But the dark has never been one of them.”

His heart fluttered inside his chest, like a songbird in a cage. “I’m glad. I don’t ever want you to be scared of me.”

The admission was perhaps closer to his heart than he had intended, but he could not find it in himself to care. There was something about these late-night meetings, when the world was illuminated only by starlight, that made him forget himself. If she asked it of him, he would

gladly carve open his own chest and present his heart to her. Spill all of his secrets until there was nothing left of him not laid bare before her.

But she had never asked for more than he was willing to share. Any secrets he had revealed to her had been freely given of his own volition.

He wondered what would happen if she one day asked him a question that would reveal the worst of himself. He could not lie to her, if that much he was certain. But even still, he dreaded the day when she would look upon him with fear once more.

“She is the worst!” exclaimed Alina as she entered the library in a huff.

Aleksander glanced up from his book as she slumped ungraciously into the seat beside him. “Who’s the worst?” he asked.

“Baghra,” said Alina, her voice dripping with undisguised disdain.

“Ah,” he said diplomatically as it was clear that Alina had more to say on the topic.

“She drugged me. Can you believe it?” She did not wait for a response before continuing. “It was entirely uncalled for. And don’t get me started on her cane. What sort of teacher thinks that the only way to get her students to learn is to beat them? I honestly don’t know why you don’t get rid of her. There must be *someone* in Ravka who could do a better job.”

Her rant over, Alina looked at him expectantly.

He did not respond immediately, because truthfully, he did not know what to say.

Complicated was an understatement when it came to describing his feelings towards his mother. Their relationship had been a festering wound for centuries now, and her actions towards the end of his previous life had only increased his resentment towards her. It was the reason that he had resolutely ignored her since coming back. It was a problem he was not prepared to deal with.

“I feel I owe her a debt,” he said eventually. Then he inhaled a long breath before admitting quietly. “You see... she is my mother.”

Alina looked shocked by his admission, her entire demeanour changing in an instant. Carefully she reached out and lay a hand on top of his. “I can’t imagine that it was easy, growing up with her around.”

The corner of his lips twitched up ruefully. “It wasn’t,” he said. “She’s never been a warm person, so growing up was... difficult. And it’s only gotten worse as the years passed by. She’s long made it clear how little she thinks of me, and I’ve long given up on hoping to ever see her be happy for me.”

He sighed. “But despite all of that, I still feel I owe her a debt. I can’t explain it really, only that there was a time when she was the only thing I had. So that’s why I haven’t banished her from the grounds of the Little Palace.”

Alina squeezed his hand softly and a rush of warmth filtered through the tether. “Thank you for telling me.”

Aleksander tried very hard to not focus on the way Alina was pressed up against his side as they sat at the table in the library. Ostensibly, she had scooted up next to him so that they could both read from the same book, although that didn't quite explain why her ankles kept brushing against his underneath the table, his heart stuttering with every fleeting touch. So instead, he kept his attention solely on the sound of her voice as she read aloud from the Philosophy tome in front of them.

“The part of morality that I have in mind is broader than justice, which has to do particularly with social institutions.” Alina paused in her recitation as she tried and failed to stifle a yawn. She leaned more of weight against his side, her head drooping until it was hovering just above his shoulder. When she resumed speaking her voice was slightly muffled, the words slurring together. “So I have taken the phrase ‘*what we owe to each other*’ as the name for this type of morality and the title of this book...”

Her words faded into soft breaths as she lost the battle to remain awake. Aleksander froze as he felt her head rest upon his shoulder. He was at a complete loss as to what he should do, the intimacy of the gesture not lost for a moment in his mind.

After several seconds had passed with no indication that she would stir anytime soon, he turned his head slowly so that he could gaze down on her. For the first time since he had reawoken, he allowed himself to take in her appearance fully.

At first glance, she looked healthier than he had ever seen her. Her cheeks were flushed with pink, the edges of her face softened from the sharpness caused by the combination of poor nutrition and the suppression of her powers. Clearly her time at the Little Palace had been good for her.

And yet, he could not help but notice the way exhaustion seemed to cling to her, even still. Underneath her eyes he could see shadows that had not faded despite the continued use of her summoning.

At least she appeared to be at peace now, sleeping pressed up against him. Aleksander would have been content to spend the rest of the night in this manner. Her silent guardian. But he knew that her neck would not thank him for it come morning. So, with a sigh, he gently tried to rouse her.

“Alina.”

“Wha...?” She blinked awake, squinting up at him in the dim light.

“You fell asleep on me,” he said teasingly.

“I would never,” she mumbled. “That would be embarrassing.”

He huffed a laugh before he shifted into a concerned tone. “Alina. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“I sleep... sometimes,” she said. “I don’t want to, but sometimes I can’t stop it...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes blinked closed again.

“You need to sleep, Alina. It’s important.”

Her eyes didn’t open but he heard her muffled response against his shoulder. “You’re one to talk...” Her breathing evened out, sleep once more taking her into its embrace.

This time he didn’t try to rouse her. Instead, he carefully maneuvered her so that he could carry her in his arms as he stood up.

His feet traced the path to the Vezda suite, operating without conscious thought as he was much more concerned of the feeling of Alina’s reassuring weight in his arms. There was still a part of him that couldn’t believe that this was all real. And yet, here she was, safe in his embrace.

As he walked, she shifted in his arms slightly, so that her head was resting against his chest. Soft puffs of air fluttered against his kefta, and he counted her breaths with the steady rise and fall of her chest, content with the reminder that she was alive.

He tried to keep his footsteps soft as he walked, not wanting anything to wake Alina as she slumbered, until eventually he reached his destination. Careful not to jostle the woman in his arms, he pushed the door open.

The bed was clearly untouched from where it had been made that morning. He pulled the sheets back before gently laying her upon the mattress. Carefully, he tucked her in, trying his best to make sure she was comfortable.

She looked peaceful asleep, her face relaxed and a single strand of dark hair falling over her forehead. The longing that seized his chest as he stared down at her was almost painful, and he quickly turned away from her for fear that his heart might burst straight out of his chest.

The room was unlit apart from a sliver of moonlight filtering in from one of the windows. The pale light landed on her desk. Its surface strewn with paper, charcoals and a worn-looking sketchbook which was lying open. Aleksander knew he should not investigate any further, to do so would be an invasion of her privacy. But he was a weak man. So he appeased himself with the knowledge that he had no wish to steal any drawings, like he had stolen her drawing of the stag in his previous life. He only wanted to look.

The page that the book was open to was blank, so he flipped to an earlier page at random. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting to find - a landscape, her friends, the stag - but he was utterly unprepared for the drawing that he uncovered.

It was unmistakably a drawing of himself.

To be more precise it was a drawing of his profile. The likeness was remarkable. She must have captured it during one of their late-night talks, but he's certain that she hadn't brought any drawing supplies to the library. Which means that she must have held the image of him in her mind and recreated it from memory.

That thought alone was enough to send his foolish heart racing. But it was not what struck him most about the image before him. No, that was the expression on his face that Alina had chosen to capture.

He was... smiling. It was not even a small, guarded smile. Instead, his head was thrown back in laughter, his eyes creased and cheeks full. He could not remember ever seeing himself look so happy.

Was this how she saw him? The attention to detail in each pencil stroke spoke of an affection that went beyond mere curiosity. Could it be that she *cared* for him?

Heart pounding, he flipped the book back to the blank page. Being careful not to wake her, he returned to her side. That same strand of hair was still lying across her forehead. With a trembling hand he brushed the lock of hair away from her face. Then, unable to resist the temptation, he leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to her forehead.

He tried not to linger, but her skin was warm beneath his lips, and he could not quite bring himself to pull away.

That was until Alina began to rouse from her slumber.

Before he could jerk away, her hand came up and tangled with his fingers that had caressed her face. His back stiffened in panic as his mind struggled to come up with some excuse that could explain what he was doing. However, luckily for him, she did not stir further. Instead, she let out a sigh as the hand that had intertwined with his went slack.

She mumbled something, the words almost too soft to hear. As it was, he could only decipher one sound, "al..."

His heart ceased beating.

It almost sounded like...

She couldn't have said...

Mal, his brain supplied - the part of his brain where his self-loathing lived. *She must have meant Mal.*

But his heart refused to listen to him, instead his thoughts were running wild.

She'd hardly mentioned Mal at all in all the time they'd spent talking. And she hadn't been writing the letters that she should have written by now. There had to be a reason for the change.

What if...?

The tiniest hint of an idea began to grow, so small that he could barely allow himself to voice it within his mind. He tried to push down at the flickering candle of hope that had started to burn deep within him. The thought was utterly ridiculous. *And yet...*

There were other changes, now that he chose to see what was in front of him rather than what he assumed must be happening. She was more confident, and her powers were developing faster. There might just be an explanation for all this. A terrifying, beautiful explanation.

Could it be that he was not alone in this time after all?

But then, just as quickly as the idea had sparked to life, it was snuffed out by a different realisation. If she knew what he had done - if she had even an inkling of the horrors he had forced upon her - then there is no conceivable way that she would even be able to tolerate his company. She would not be talking to him about her hopes and fears, or gifting him flowers, or falling asleep on his shoulder.

The idea was merely the result of the wild imagination of a hopeless fool.

There was one way he could know for sure, of course. If he told her the truth about everything - his past and his past life - then he could be sure that there were no secrets between them. But with that possibility came the risk that she would run from him.

If she ran, then it would destroy him just as surely as when she had buried a knife in his heart.

He sighed. She deserved the truth from him, whatever her circumstances. The only question was when would he be brave enough to reveal it. To do so would be the ultimate leap of faith.

Could he do it for his own sake? He wasn't sure whether he could.

He stared down at the sleeping woman before him. The unknowing keeper of his heart.

For her sake... He knew that there was nothing he would not do.

He would tell her soon. But until then, he would steal a few more precious happy moments, with the hope that the memories of her smile might keep his heart beating for a little longer after she was gone.

Careful not to disturb her further he straightened up and took several steps back. He swore that his fingers were tingling from where she had held them.

Reluctantly, his feet began to carry him out of the room. But before he stepped through the threshold and out into the corridor, he permitted himself a lingering look back at where Alina was sleeping peacefully.

“Goodnight, Alina,” he whispered as the door shut between them. “Sweet dreams.”

Chapter End Notes

There's only one chapter left to go for part one of 'Come Back and Haunt Me'. But please do not fear, that will not be the end of this story.

Also, I may have snuck a 'The Good Place' reference into this chapter, so if you spot it then let me know!

Do not speak as loud as my heart

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday! I am in the middle of exams at the moment, but writing is my favourite distraction. And all of your encouragement is keeping me sane, so thank you!

I hope you enjoy this final chapter!

Although fear not - this is not the end of the tale.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aleksander stared at the kefta that hung in front of him. It was beautiful and one-of-a-kind. Just like its intended owner.

The golden fabric caught the light whenever it moved, giving the unmistakable impression of the sunlight for which it was modelled after. Swirling embroidery of sunbursts - also in gold - adorned the shoulders and hem.

There would be no doubt as to who this kefta was for.

And on the entire kefta there was not a single stitch of black.

Aleksander knew exactly what statement he was making with this kefta. Giving Alina her own colour would position her as his equal in the eyes of his Grisha. He would not dress her in black this time. No. This time he would lay no claim over her.

Over the few months that she had been at the Little Palace he had watched her grow and shine. He had imparted as much knowledge as he could on the state of the war and the running of the Second Army. She had quizzed him endlessly on topics of both the important and the mundane. And she was undeniably well-liked, even popular, among her fellow Grisha.

With or without him, she was sure to thrive. He had made sure of it. And so there was no longer any reason he could give himself for continuing to keep his secrets from her.

He knew it was only foolish optimism that hoped that she might understand. He wished - *oh how he wished* - that she might hear his secrets and still choose to stay. That she might look upon his very soul and judge him kindly.

There was a part of him that would do anything for her to never leave his side. The part that had sought to control her in his previous life. To bind her to him for eternity, for all the good that had done him in the end. But there was a bigger part of him that wished for her happiness above all else. And it was that part of him that forced him to make his choice.

He would tell her.

With a sigh, he found a blank piece of paper and began to write.

Dearest Alina Miss Starkov,

I wish

It would give me the greatest pleasure

I would be honoured if you would agree to accompany me riding tomorrow morning. There are ~~secrets lies~~ important matters I need to discuss with you, and these matters are best spoken of away from the Palace grounds. If you should agree then I will ensure that your tutors are made aware that you should be excused from your usual lessons.

This kefta is my gift yours to keep. It is your choice whether you wish to wear it. I do not wish to pressure you either way.

Yours forever and always,

At General Kirigan

He stared down at the note, written in an uncharacteristically trembling hand, before sighing and crumpling it in a ball. Trying not to overthink, he wrote the letter again - excluding any of his ramblings. Once satisfied, he folded the note and sealed it with a drop of wax. Summoning Genya, he passed the note and kefta off to her to be delivered to Alina.

And then he waited.

It was a little before dusk when he received a response, written in familiar, neat handwriting. The joy he felt at her acceptance almost overcame his fear at what he had to tell her.

The next morning came both too soon and not soon enough for Aleksander.

He rose and dressed early, before forcing himself to eat a simple breakfast of oats, the only thing his twisting stomach could handle. After a brief internal debate, he decided to leave his kefta behind. Then he left his rooms to head to the stables.

There was something almost therapeutic about readying the horses. He took his time to groom both his majestic black stallion and the white mare that he knew Alina had grown fond of in his previous life. Then he tacked them both up, taking extra care to ensure that the girth on Alina's saddle was tight enough. There would be no unfortunate mishaps to interrupt their ride.

Shortly before he was due to meet Alina, he walked the two horses out of the stables and into the courtyard. It could have only been a wait of a few minutes before she appeared, but to him it felt like hours.

"Good morning," said Alina. Her voice was bright and cheery from behind him.

"Good morning," he said as he turned to face her.

As soon as he saw her his heart jumped into his throat. She had chosen to wear the gold kefta.

"You look beautiful." He could not stop himself from speaking the words aloud, for it was the truth. She looked utterly radiant, dressed in the colour that suited her so well.

"Thank you." She blushed at his words as she looked down at her kefta, but he could see on her face she had a small smile. "And thank you for your gift." she gestured to the golden fabric.

"It suits you. Gold is your colour."

He was reminded of his words to her the last time they had been in this situation. *Call me Aleksander*. He longed to hear his name on her lips, but he didn't deserve that from her. Not when there were still so many secrets between them. So instead he merely gestured to the horses and said, "Shall we?"

Their fingers brushed as she took the mare's reigns from him, sending those familiar sparks up his arm. He tried not to wonder if that was the last touch she would give him of her own volition.

They mounted the horses, and then side-by-side they rode out of the courtyard.

The route they took was a familiar one and it was not long before they reached his intended destination. The crumbling stone fountain was just as he remembered. It quietly trickled as the two of them tied off the horses nearby.

Alina approached the fountain first. He watched her draw a silver coin from her pocket and bring it to her lips. Stepping up beside her, it was impossible to miss the way her eyes glanced towards him as she flipped the coin into the water.

"Are you not going to make a wish?" she asked when he made no move to follow suit.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't want to tempt fate. It's already given me more than I deserve."

She met his gaze, an unknowable expression in her face. A moment passed, punctuated only by the sound of gently rippling water.

"In your note you said there were things you wanted to discuss." The question in her voice was clear.

"Yes." He had to pause to inhale a breath, his nerves suddenly as fragile as ice. "There are things I need to tell you, about who I was. Who I am."

She said nothing, but she did reach out to try and lay a hand atop his where it was resting on the edge of the fountain. Before she could touch him, he jerked his hand away.

"I've been lying to you, and for that I am sorry." He closed his eyes to try and stop the tears from falling. "There's so many things I'm sorry for."

He forced his eyes open; she deserved for him to look her in the eye for his confession. Before he could second-guess himself any further, he spoke.

"The truth is...." His voice shook. "The truth is that I'm the Black Heretic."

Her entire body went rigid. She blinked once. Twice. He knew it was only a matter of time before the shock wore off, but he needed to confess all of his sins to her.

"I created the Fold four-hundred years ago. I have the deaths of *thousands* on my conscience, Alina. *That's* the kind of man I am. A monster." His breathing was ragged as he choked the words out.

He expected to flinch back at his admission, but she stayed perfectly still as she continued to meet his gaze. She swallowed once, and then opened her mouth to speak.

"Why?" Her voice was seemingly calm, in direct opposition to his own.

"What do you mean?" He didn't understand. Why wasn't she screaming?

"You've told me what you did. Now tell me why you did it."

"I told you. I'm a monster."

She took a single step forward, and he stumbled backwards, away from her.

"I don't believe you," she said forcefully. "There was a reason. There must have been."

Tears stung his eyes, blurring his vision almost to the point where he couldn't see. He balled his hands into fists by his sides, forcing his breathing to try and slow. If she wanted an explanation then he would try his best to give one - he would give anything if she asked it of him.

He turned to cast his gaze into the fountain's waters. There rippled his reflection, almost unchanged in all his long years of existence. He took another long breath.

"There was a woman that I loved... Her name was Luda." It was the first time he had spoken her name aloud in centuries. He paused again to inhale a deep breath before continuing. "We both knew that she would not live as long as me, but we thought we had more time." His voice cracked. "We were supposed to have more time." He could taste salt on his lips from the tears that refused to stop flowing. "She was murdered in front of me, on the word of a King who was terrified of the power that I had wielded in his name."

He paused again to try and get air into his lungs. Tears fell onto rippling water, distorting his reflection. "I was so angry. I couldn't protect her, or any of the countless other Grisha that

were murdered on the King's orders." His nails dug painfully into his palms from the tension in his body. "It wasn't like it is now. Grisha didn't know how to fight. We needed an army to protect ourselves, so I sought to make one."

He glanced to the side to where Alina was standing, back rigid. Her posture had not changed at all throughout any of his story. She was still staring at him, meeting his gaze with a determination that he knew that he did not possess.

"When the soldiers came for us, I intended to take control of them. To turn them against the King so that no more Grisha blood would need to be spilled. But merzost is tricky. Unpredictable. I thought I was strong enough to control it, but I wasn't. That's when I made the Fold."

Unable to look away any longer Aleksander wrenched his gaze back to Alina. She was still watching him, and still, she did not scream. He searched her gaze for fear, revulsion, horror, but he found none. However, his confession was only halfway complete, and he needed to see it all of the way through. He owed her that much, at the very least.

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. "There is more I must tell you."

A flicker of surprise and confusion crossed her expression. "More?" she said, softly.

He nodded. "Meeting you in Kribirsk... That was not the first time I've met a Sun Summoner." He smiled slightly, despite his tears. "There was another... She blazed into my life just as you did."

Although he did not know the reason, that elicited a reaction from Alina. Her breathing quickened as a layer of tension seemed to pass over her body.

Despite his confusion, he continued. "She was radiant. And smart. And kind." He paused. "And although I never told her, I loved her so much that sometimes I could hardly breathe for fear that my chest might burst open."

The sound of a quiet gasp.

"I do not believe she loved me back. At least, I hope she did not, because the things I did to her." He drew in another shaky breath, as grief and regret washed over him. "It would have only been worse if she had loved me," he said quietly.

Through his own tears, he could see Alina's eyes begin to water. There was a sorrow in her expression that was unfathomably deep.

"I thought I could keep my secrets from her. But then, one night, she found out the truth of my past, and she ran from me," he said. "When I found out, I was scared - yes - but the overwhelming emotion that consumed me was rage." The memory of his anger still stayed with him, the overwhelming bitterness inside his heart. "I am a cruel and jealous man," he spat. "When I found her, I sought to bind her to me, so that she could never leave me again.

"Using an amplifier, I collared her. It gave me control of her powers and I foolishly believed that it would entitle me to her heart as well." There was not enough shame in all of the world to describe how he felt about what he had done to her. "I should have known that she would never stand for such a violation." He sighed. "We fought, and in every sense of the word she was stronger than me. She took back control of her powers that I had selfishly tried to claim for my own. Then she left me for dead - just as I deserved."

Alina took a step closer to him and this time he did not try to step back. There was so little space between them that he could almost feel the rise and fall of her chest as she stared up at him. Her eyes seemed to pin him in place, but still he could not see any terror or disgust in her expression. Only sorrow.

"It would have been simpler if it had ended there, but somehow I survived." He had oft wondered why it was that he did not perish in the Fold, following Novokribirsk. So much hurt could have been avoided if he had not been around to cause it. "As all things eventually do, it ended in war." A war entirely of his own making. "There were so many casualties. My hands are red with the blood of my own people, but I was too blinded by rage to see that it must end."

She did not step away from him. She didn't even flinch.

"We tried to destroy each other, and in the end she succeeded..." His voice trailed off, the memory of cold steel in his chest filling his mind. "That was the last time I ever saw her," he said softly.

His story complete, he cast his eyes downward. This was it. He had bared his soul for her, leaving nothing hidden. And now he awaited his judgement. The dagger of her rejection hovered above his heart. All she needed to do was grasp it and he would be destroyed.

He heard, rather than saw, her inhale a long breath. This was it. The anger. The screaming. He braced for it as best he could.

"What... what happened to her?" Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper.

He looked up sharply. That was not a question he had anticipated. She met his gaze, her eyes swimming with tears.

"I do not know." His voice, too, was soft. "I hope that wherever she is now, she is happy." He closed his eyes as he imagined it. Imagined *her*. "I pray that she was able to live the life she deserved, with the man she chose." That was his only consolation from all of the things he did, that she might have the life she wanted after he was gone. "Wherever she is, I hope that she does not think of me. It is the very least she deserves, a long life free from reminders of the pain I put her through."

There was the sound of a choked sob. At first he thought it was his own, but then he opened his eyes to find that the sound had come from Alina. Her shoulders shook, her eyes red, as she stared up at him. He stood frozen in place, as he waited for her to scream. To flinch. To fight. But she did none of those things. Instead, she very slowly extended her hand towards him, palm facing up.

He looked down at her hand, confusion filling him. Nothing was making any sense, but it was clear what she wanted him to do. So, cautiously, he reached out and placed his hand in hers. Her fingers closed round his hand, the thrum of her power warming her skin. The whole world narrowed to just the feel of her hand in his.

Then, before he could react, she yanked at his arm, forcing him to stumble forward a step. "What?" He tried to say, but the noise was cut off by the feel of her arms wrapping around him and her face burying into the crook of his neck.

His heart was beating too fast. *Nothing was making any sense.* He was free falling and he didn't know where he would land, only that eventually he had to crash somewhere. He couldn't *think*, thoughts racing past his mind too quickly to grasp onto.

Everything was too much. The world was moving too fast and he couldn't keep up. But then, all at once, everything slowed. As he heard the most beautiful sound he had ever heard in all of his years of existence.

The most beautiful, *impossible* sound.

"*Aleksander.*"

His heart stopped. Everything stopped. And in the back of his mind he felt the spark of a dream that he had buried deep within him. *It can't be.*

"How... how do you know my name?" He was still frozen in her arms, not daring to move lest it broke the spell that they were both under.

She chuckled, a wet, throaty sound, half muffled by how her face was still pressed into his neck. "You told it to me. Don't you remember?"

Impossible. The solution was completely and utterly *impossible*.

And yet...

He had to clear his throat twice to even begin to say the words aloud.

"It's *you?*" The sound he made was more of a sob than speech, but she seemed to decipher his meaning.

"It's me." She smiled as she spoke. Even without looking at her face, he could feel her smile against his neck.

"I don't understand," he said, voice still shaking.

"You weren't the only one sent back in time," she said, gently. Patiently. Her arms squeezed tighter around him, and he longed to give in. To sink into her embrace and never resurface.

"No, that's not what I meant," he said. His next words were quieter and he was terrified of the answer he might receive. "Why haven't you tried to fight me? Or at the very least run away? I don't understand... Why have you stayed?"

She pulled her head back slightly, and he mourned the loss of her touch. But instead of stepping away, she instead brought her hands to cup his face, tilting his chin downwards so she could look into his eyes. They were so close together that he could see himself reflected in her pupils. He looked just as much of a mess as he felt inside.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she asked.

Words had utterly failed him, so he shook his head. He was still free falling, but he could see the ground rushing up towards him. The only question was if the landing would hurt. Or would she catch him?

Her hands clutched at his face as she continued to gaze up into his eyes. When she spoke there was no trace of a lie in her voice.

“Because I love you.”

It couldn’t be true. *It couldn’t be.*

She must have seen the disbelief in his expression because she continued. “I never stopped loving you.” Her fingers traced the edge of his jaw. It was as if she felt that same need to be close to him as he felt for her. “Aleksander, I burned my heart to ash with your body, and I have known no peace since that day. I looked for you in every shadow, every night sky.” Her voice cracked. “I never stopped hoping that you would somehow be there.”

“You can’t love me.” His words were forced out through sobs. “Not after everything I did.”

He meant to pull away from her, but she pulled him in tighter. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her head tucked under his chin, as she pulled him in. Closer still.

“When has the heart ever listened to reason?” Her breath ghosted against his chest as she spoke. “Believe it or not, It’s the truth.”

He did not know how it could possibly be true, but he also knew that while Alina was many things, a liar was not one of them. If she said that she loved him - *she loved him* - then there was nothing for him to do except believe her.

Giving in, he brought his hands to rest at her waist, returning her embrace as he so desperately wanted to.

Time passed. It could have been only minutes, but to Aleksander it felt like hours. Nothing existed for him but the feel of Alina’s arms wrapped around him. The steady rise and fall of her chest soothing him as he drowned in her embrace.

As much as he would have been content to never move or speak again, to stay in the safety of her embrace forever. He still has questions that were so far unanswered.

He sighed. “How long have you known... about me?”

“Since Kribirsk. You didn’t exactly do a good job at hiding it.” The smile in her voice was obvious. “I thought you knew about me as well. But then in the carriage, I realised that you

had no idea."

"Why didn't you say something?"

Her arms tightened around him, firmly, but not painfully. "Because I didn't know if I could trust you." Her voice was kind, with no trace of contempt. "But I wanted to believe in you. I wanted so desperately to believe that you are capable of change." Her fingers tangled in his hair at the nape of his neck as she clung to him. "And you *are*, Aleksander. Day after day, I watched you try and make things better. You helped Genya. You gave me the letters. You told me about your past." Her voice broke. "You did so well, and I'm so proud of you."

His heart seized - no one had *ever* said that they were proud of him. It conjured emotions within him that he was woefully unprepared to deal with, so instead he tried to deflect with another question.

"How long has it been, for you?" he asked.

She sighed and he got the sense that she was reluctant to answer him. But after a long moment of silence, punctuated only by the sound of their beating hearts and still laboured breathing, she spoke. "Fifteen, maybe twenty years, I think, before the wasting sickness finally got to me," she said quietly. "It was difficult to keep track at the end."

No. "No," he stammered. It couldn't be true. It *couldn't* be. "No, you were supposed to have *decades, centuries*." His voice was raised almost to the point of shouting, but he didn't care. Not when he was faced with the complete unfairness of it all.

"I lost my powers, Aleksander," she said in a clear attempt to try and soothe him. "With them gone, it was like a piece of my soul was missing. The sickness came back, just like when I was a child, only this time there was nothing I could do to stop it."

Tears poured down his face. It was all his fault. He had done this to her, robbed her of the life she deserved.

Once more, her hands moved to cup his face as she stared into his eyes. Her fingers brushed away the tears that were spilling over his cheeks. "Don't cry, Aleksander," she said gently. "My death wasn't painful, I think I just faded away. There one minute, and then the next... the next moment I awoke on the docks at Kribrisk. And there you were, looking just as you had in my dreams. Except you were real, and when you called to me I could feel my light for the first time in what felt like eternity." She smiled, even as her own tears began to fall again. "I realised how numb I'd been to everything, now that I could finally *feel* again."

His hands tangled in the fabric of her kefta, quite possibly ruining it, but he couldn't bring himself to care. "You must have had some happiness, surely. What about your tracker?" The disdain he felt towards Oretsev was nothing compared to the horror he felt at the idea that she might have been unhappy in her previous life.

What was the point of it all, if she wasn't happy?

"Mal was..." She sighed. "Marrying Mal felt like the right thing to do, after everything. But he only ever loved part of me, the part of me that was still the orphan girl from Keramzin. He never understood what I'd lost in losing my powers. And obviously I could never talk to him about how I felt about you."

She was still gazing into his eyes, gazing into his soul. "I kept my promise to you," she whispered.

There was no need to ask what promise she was referring to. The last words he had been able to say to her were still seared into his mind.

Someone to mourn me. No grave for them to desecrate.

"There was no grave." Her fingers stroked at the back of his neck. Whether it was to comfort him or her, he could not say. "All I had was my patch of forget-me-nots. I needed somewhere to go where I could remember you."

"Alina..." He trailed off. There were no words left to describe what he was currently feeling.

"Aleksander." She stared up at him, the whole universe in her eyes. "We've both been given this chance to try again. The past is gone; we cannot change it. But we can choose to move forward *together*, to shape the future into something better." She brought her hands to clasp his, holding them over her heart. "In this life I choose you, Aleksander. Will you stand by me?"

"Yes." He squeezed her hands tight, pressing his forehead to hers. "Yes, *of course* I'll stand by you, Alina." Beneath his palms he can feel Alina's power start to swell as her skin shines with the light of her sun. "Everything I have, everything I am, it's yours. My heart. My soul. They belong to you. And I will spend the rest of my life atoning for the hurt I caused you."

"Oh Aleksander," she said. "I've already forgiven you."

Her light enveloped them both. Pushing away the darkness of his sorrow until all he could feel was her warmth. He let his eyes drift close as he basked in her glow. His final confession was barely above a whisper, but he knew she could hear him. "I love you."

His eyes were still closed, but they opened instantly when he felt the brush of lips against his own. He eagerly responded to the kiss. Hands tangling in Alina's hair as he tried to banish any distance between them. She clearly felt the same as she pressed herself closer to him, lips moving eagerly.

His fears. His doubts. In that moment, none of it mattered. He had Alina in his arms. *His Alina*, he thought breathlessly. And for the first time in his eternal life, he had found *home*.

Her kiss was his sanctuary. He would be content to stay like this forever.

But all things must come to an end. *Not an end, just a pause* - his mind supplied. And eventually she pulled away from him slightly. He tried to chase the sweet taste of her lips, but she merely smiled and nudged their noses together in reassurance.

She gazed up at him and he gazed down at her.

“I love you too,” she said with a smile. And Aleksander was wrong - that was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. “There’s more we need to talk about, but all of it can wait.” She kissed him again. A light brush of her lips that spoke of so much more. So much potential. “We have time, after all.”

And wasn’t that a wonderful thought. *They had time.*

Chapter End Notes

Woo! We made it. I know quite a few of you guessed that Alina had also come back, but I hope you enjoyed the journey. I've had such a blast reading all of your comments throughout this story, particularly as some of the speculation was spot on.

Please keep an eye out for Part 2 of this series - 'Begin Anew'. Which will follow Alina's POV throughout Second Chances. She's had a lot going on throughout all of this, and I can't wait to share it all with you.

A massive thank you to everyone who's commented and given kudos. Your support really helps me stay motivated and I appreciate each and every one of you.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments and kudos are very much appreciated.

This story is fully outlined and almost completely written. I will be updating weekly on Fridays.

Also this fic is the first instalment in a series, so feel free to subscribe to the series if you want to get notified when the next stories in this universe are posted.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!